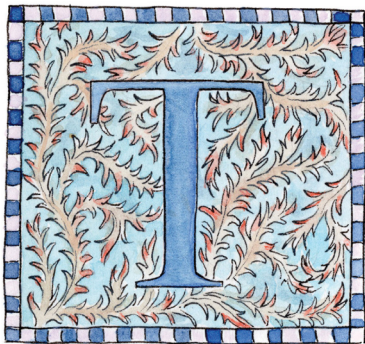


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# The God Who Dwells in Doubt

*The philosopher Bertrand Russell was famous for his paradoxes, but he left the greatest one to the rest of us*



THE MOST PROFOUND experience I have had of God occurred when I was a devout atheist. At 17, I took a cross-country Trailways bus to work at a Jewish summer camp in California. Although not hostile to Judaism itself, I had spent my teen years reading Bertrand Russell, the marvelously witty logician who wrote convincing diatribes against God. One day, we were riding through the Colorado Rockies, and I was struck by the certainty that those mountains showed the hand of an artist. I knew the arguments against my intuition: the apparently blind yet beautiful forces of geology that formed the slopes and rock formation. Yet what I felt was awe and surrender before something infinitely greater than anything I had ever known. It shook me.

I pushed the feeling away because of how unsettling it was. Following the example of Russell, I thought that people who believed in God did so as a result of some personal weakness. They needed

a crutch or were afraid of death or did not have the wisdom to construct a life for themselves without guidance from a sacred book.

In other words, when it came to faith, I was a jerk.

I then came to learn that Russell himself was kind of a jerk. Upon reading his autobiography, I realized that this paragon of logic had lived a supremely messy life: multiple marriages, affairs, estranged children—all the wreckage of someone who is personally unwise. And I met people of deep religious faith who were as strong, as deep, and as thoughtful as any others I had known. The older I got, the larger the puzzle of life well-lived. It was clear to me I was missing some pieces.

“The fool says in his heart there is no God,” says the Psalmist (14:1). Foolishness is generally a quality we associate with the head rather than the heart, and atheism is as well. Yet the Psalmist is wise. Both belief and its negation are not purely intellectual exercises. For many years when I taught Jewish philosophy, I put proofs for God on the board: the ontological proof, the teleological proof, the cosmological proof. Never did I have a student slap her forehead and exclaim, “Now I believe!”

Conversely, many people lose faith in God because of tragedy. Yet tragedy gives them no new information. Did anyone not know before they got cancer that human beings get cancer? Or before a loved one dies that people die? Our deepest connection to this world is not reason but relation. People who, in tragedy, lose their faith do so not because they learn something new about God but because their relationship with God changes from experiencing God’s world in a new and painful way. Though reason must be allowed its say and sway, we come to God as we come to any deep relationship: through the pathway of the heart.

The Kotzker Rebbe famously asked his disciples where God dwells. Schooled in the rudiments of theology, they answered, “Everywhere.”

Doesn't the prophet teach us that "all the world is filled with His glory" (Isaiah 6:3)? But the Kotzker was having none of it. "No," he told them, "God dwells wherever we let God in."

This belief by volition is also a heart message. The central declaration of the Jewish prayer service, the *shema*, teaches that these words of faith "should be on your heart." The Kotzker, again, remarks that they should ideally be *in* one's heart, not *on* it—but hearts aren't always open. If you put the words on your heart, then, when your heart is open, receptive—when the ego wanes, when vulnerability cracks it even a tiny bit—the words will seep in.

For some, this poses no challenge. As people are gifted with musical or mathematical ability, there are prodigies of faith. Reading the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose magical prose casts a sheen on the world, you feel that he was born to belief. His gaze was attuned to enchantment. People of steady faith cannot always understand why the rest of us do not simply open our hearts.

For me the skepticism of distance is always pushing at the edges of my faith. Is the awe that strikes me in the mountains the sensation of faith or just a desperate wish? Am I reaching for a fantasy to make the world meaningful, or intuiting something that in less attuned moments eludes my grasp?

I am moved to faith because even in God's apparent absence I have a sense of the shape of what is missing. Sartre once spoke of what it is like to wait for someone in a café. As strangers walk in, each one disappointingly not the person for whom you yearn, you suddenly recognize that the one you anticipate, the absent one, is more real to you than all those who stand before you. Sometimes the God I cannot reach still feels more real than the world I see simply by opening my eyes.

Even since before my Russell-reading teenage years, I have never known faith without doubt. Periods of belief have always been punc-

tuated by moments of dark unbelief, a feeling of disenchantment and abandonment, as though the world has no curtain to pull back, a world of no Oz, no wizard, no home. And like most people, I have a powerful impulse to identify my bleakest visions with the truest ones, as though disillusion were the test. Why should the world not disappoint us? It makes no promises.

But paradoxically, the moments of faith feel more true to me, as though they are more in line with the deeper reality of things. My best self is my believing self, and it is not courage or wisdom that leads me beyond it to disbelief, but rather a tightness or closedness that makes me insensible to the secret chord.

In darkness, through losses, cancer, heartbreak, and the times I have beaten my fists futilely against the walls of an unyielding world, I have been tempted to treat the Divine instrumentally. Yet God refuses to be shrunk to human polarities: Victory is not God's assurance; nor is tragedy God's banishment. Accepting that I am small, fragile, and fleeting, I know how many before me and around me grow through their pain to *bitachon* (trust). God will not dispense health like a cosmic vendor or be enlisted as a party to our quarrels. The only real promise is presence. What God wants from me is me; from you, you.

As I have gotten older, God has grown at once more abstract and more personal. A two-year-old cannot know what an adult is, cannot even know what he doesn't know. God is far greater in relation to us than an adult is to a two-year-old. Therefore my sense of God is mystic and unknowing. When people confidently pronounce "God wants" or "God says," it reminds me how small and limited we are, and how childishly bold are some of God's presumed spokespeople.

At the same time, God and I have lived with one another for a lifetime. There is a strange intimacy to this old, unfathomable companion of my life. "You have searched me and know me" (Psalm 139). I

am no surprise to God, even when I surprise myself. There is both an unease and a great comfort in feeling oneself known.

When the Seer of Lublin, a great Hasidic master, was a child, he would wander in the forest. His father asked him why, and he said, “I go there to find God.” “That’s beautiful,” his father answered, “but haven’t I taught you that God is the same everywhere?” “God is,” said the boy, “but I’m not.”

We shift with the landscape. Alone in prayer, I am certain, sometimes, that I am not alone. So much of faith and history and practice in Judaism is about the collective, and I have had moments of singing with the congregation when the boundaries of self seem to dissolve, and we are one voice ascending. I have had moments of communion with one whom I love, when the oppression of the everyday is shed like an extra skin and joy seems too pale a word for the experience of transcendence shot through with the presence of God. How can those things be less real, less true, than the moments when I chuckle at the witty shaft of the atheist? In those moments of transcendence, it is time that feels less real than God.

I have grown old enough to doubt even my doubts, and to stand beside Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, who declared himself a “moon man” whose faith waxed and waned.

This year with my students, we studied the thought of the Esh Kodesh, the remarkable rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto, Kalman Schapira. The Esh Kodesh suffered terribly in his lifetime and while not entirely absolving God for his suffering, he wrote that the destruction of the rational mind by extreme suffering left open a channel by which one could reach directly to God. This was not a repudiation of the rational or a glorification of suffering; it was a recognition of the limits of our reason and the reality that suffering can place us on a different plane of existence.

I think about the Esh Kodesh, mourning his son who was killed

in the bombing of Poland at the beginning of the war, grieving his community whose destruction he witnessed, people he could not save, and the deep learning that he must have feared would be lost. The Esh Kodesh's writings were accidentally unearthed in Poland after the war in which both he and his family had perished, a salvage of the sacred that has the tinge of miracle. I want to stand with his insight, that suffering is a depth experience, the kind of experience that suspends thought if only for a brief time and opens us to the overwhelmingness that we usually try to channel through our powerful but bounded intellect. The heart may be chaotic and undiscerning. But it is vast. It can receive and nurture things of which the mind does not know.

So I hold together a certain faith and a persistent doubt; a God who is beyond all imagining and closer than I am to myself. How can life be less than a paradox, a motionless dance, a silent scream, a prayer whose destination can never be known? \*